

5

Government by Terror 1793-4

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The Terror was the most dramatic phase of the Revolution. For opponents of the Revolution it symbolised the chaos and anarchy that France had sunk into. Supporters of the Republic, on the other hand, believed that only the most ruthless policies could ensure its survival. These events are considered in a number of themes:

- Why government by Terror came about
- The dominance of the *sans-culottes*
- The impact of the Terror
- The Dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety (CPS)
- The overthrow of Robespierre

Key dates

1793	March 10	Revolutionary Tribunal established
	April 6	Committee of Public Safety created
	June 2	Girondin deputies purged
	June 24	A new constitution approved
	July 27	Robespierre joined the CPS
	August 23	Decree of <i>levée en masse</i> issued
	September 17	Law of Suspects
	September 22	Year II began
	September 29	General Maximum introduced
	October 5	New revolutionary calendar
	December 4	Law of 14 Frimaire establishes Revolutionary Government
1794	March 24	Execution of Hébert and his leading supporters
	April 5	Danton and Desmoulins executed
	June 8	Festival of the Supreme Being
	July 27-28	Coup of Thermidor
	July 28	Execution of Robespierre

1 | Emergence of Government by Terror

The symbol of the Terror is the guillotine and it is this image that most people have in mind when they think of the French Revolution (see page 58). Bloodthirsty purges, terrified citizens, dictatorship and the suppression of the liberties which had been so triumphantly announced in the Declaration of Rights of 1789: all are associated with the Terror.

While the Terror is the most dramatic phase of the Revolution, it had less influence on the formation of modern France than the great reforms of the Constituent Assembly. The French historians Furet and Richet saw the period from August 1792 to July 1794 as a time when extremist *sans-culottes* knocked the Revolution off course. They forced the country's leaders to adopt policies that were contrary to the liberal reforms of the Constituent Assembly. Their support was necessary to preserve the Revolution but they did not make any permanent gains for themselves or any lasting changes. After the fall of Robespierre, the Revolution, they maintain, returned to its earlier course.

Government by Terror came into being because of the need to organise the Republic against internal and external threats to its survival. There were two periods of terror and both were associated with the war abroad.

- The first began with the attack on the Tuileries on 10 August 1792, included the September Massacres, and came to an end with the Battle of Valmy, when the allied invasion was held up and then pushed back (see pages 92–4).
- The second period began with the *journée* of 31 May–2 June 1793, when some Girondin deputies were arrested, and ended with the execution of Robespierre and his supporters in July 1794. During the start of this second Terror, French armies were doing badly and the country was once again faced with invasion. Its end came shortly after the victory of Fleurus in June 1794, which secured France's frontiers.

The political crisis

It was clear to some politicians that in order to fight a war against both internal and external enemies the support of the people was necessary. To achieve this some popular demands would have to be granted. This was realised first of all by the Montagnards. And just as the Montagnards were drawing closer to the *sans-culottes*, the Plain was drawing closer to the Montagnards. Its members shared the Girondin hatred of Robespierre and Marat, but they held the Girondins responsible for the failures in the war (Dumouriez had been closely associated with them), the rising in the Vendée and the economic crisis. After all, several ministers were Girondins. The Plain, therefore, joined the Montagnards in favouring repressive measures.

Key question

What was the reason for introducing government by Terror?

Key terms

Anti-republican opposition

Forces opposed to the Republic. Comprising former members of the nobility, refractory priests and monarchists.

Committee of General Security

Had overall responsibility for police security, surveillance and spying.

Revolutionary Tribunal

A court specialising in trying those accused of counter-revolutionary activities.

Representatives-on-mission

Mainly Jacobin deputies from the Convention who were sent to reassert government authority.

Comités de surveillance

Surveillance or watch committees, sometimes known simply as revolutionary committees.

Summary execution decree

From 19 March 1793, any rebels captured with arms were to be executed immediately.

Barère, a leader of the Plain, told the Convention that it should recognise three things:

1. In a state of emergency no government could rule by normal methods.
2. The bourgeoisie should not isolate itself from the people, whose demands should be satisfied.
3. Since it was vital the bourgeoisie retain control of this alliance with the people, the Convention must take the initiative by introducing the necessary measures.

The machinery of the Terror

Against a background of mounting crisis – military defeat, civil war, severe economic problems and **anti-republican opposition** which threatened to overturn the Revolution – the Convention passed a range of measures between 10 March and 20 May 1793 designed to deal with these problems and ensure its survival.

They had three objectives:

- to identify, place under observation and punish suspects
- to make government more effective and ensure that its orders were carried out
- to meet at least some of the economic demands of the *sans-culottes*.

Committee of General Security (CGS)

The task of rooting out all anti-republican opposition was given to the **Committee of General Security**. On 10 March 1793 a **Revolutionary Tribunal** was set up in Paris to try counter-revolutionary suspects. It was intended to prevent massacres like those of September 1792. 'Let us embody Terror', said Danton in the debate on the decree, 'so as to prevent the people from doing so'. This tribunal was to become one of the main instruments of what became known as the Terror.

Owing to the resistance to conscription and the suspicion of generals after Dumouriez's defection, **representatives-on-mission** were sent to the provinces. They had almost unlimited powers over the department administrations and the armies and were intended as the first stage in reasserting central control over the provinces. Plots by royalists were blamed for the rising in the Vendée, so **comités de surveillance** were set up in each commune and each section of major towns. They provided many victims for the Revolutionary Tribunal.

Severe measures were to be taken against rebels. The **summary execution decree** provided for the trial and execution of armed rebels within 24 hours of capture. These trials were held without a jury and there was no appeal. They condemned many more

Key date

Revolutionary Tribunal set up to try counter-revolutionary suspects: 10 March 1793

victims than the Revolutionary Tribunal itself did. Very harsh laws were also passed against *émigrés*: their property was confiscated by government officials and they were to be executed if they returned to France.

Committee of Public Safety (CPS)

On 6 April 1793 one of the most important decisions taken by the Convention was to set up the Committee of Public Safety (CPS).

Its purpose was to supervise and speed up the activities of ministers, whose authority it superseded. The CPS was not a dictatorship: it depended on the support of the Convention, which approved its powers each month.

As to the composition of the new Committee, Danton, supported by the Plain, wanted a committee without extremists. Thus of the nine members selected in April, seven, including Barère, were from the Plain. There were only two members from the Mountain, of whom Danton was one, and no Girondins at all. Danton and Robespierre spoke of the need for winning the support of the people for the Republic. This, they felt, could be done by economic concessions. On 4 May a maximum price, which the Girondins opposed in principle, was fixed for grain and later in the month a compulsory loan was imposed on the wealthy.

All these measures – Revolutionary Tribunals, representatives-on-mission, watch committees, the CPS and the summary execution decree – were vital parts of the machinery of the Terror. At first they were applied only partially, if at all, outside the Vendée.

The overthrow of the Girondins

Danton and other Montagnards had asked the Girondins to stop attacking Parisian *sans-culottes* as *buveurs de sang* (see page 93) but to no avail.

- On 26 May Robespierre came down on the side of the *sans-culottes* when he invited 'the people to place themselves in **insurrection** against the corrupt [Girondin] deputies'.
- On 31 May a rising began which spread rapidly when news of the overthrow of the Jacobins in Lyon reached Paris on 1 June.
- On 2 June 80,000 National Guardsmen surrounded the Convention and directed their cannon at it. They demanded the expulsion of the Girondins from the Assembly and a maximum price imposed on all essential goods. When the deputies tried to leave they were forced back. For the first time armed force was being used against an elected assembly.

To avoid a massacre or a seizure of power by a revolutionary commune, the Convention was compelled to agree to the arrest of 29 Girondin deputies and two ministers. Following the purge of the Girondins a young royalist, Charlotte Corday, assassinated Marat in the vain belief that it would end the Revolution.

The Committee of Public Safety was established: 6 April 1793

Key date

Key question
What was the significance of the overthrow of the Girondins?

Insurrection
An uprising of ordinary people, predominantly *sans-culottes*.

Key term

Key term



Marat Assassinated, by J.L. David, 1793. Marat was one of the most extreme of the Jacobin and was very popular with the *sans-culottes*. David has chosen to present the body of Marat in a classic pose used by many artists over the centuries to portray Christ after his removal from the cross. Why do you think he has chosen to paint Marat in this pose?

Key question

How serious a threat to the government was the Federalist revolt?

The federal revolt

As the military crisis worsened Montagnard Jacobin deputies turned on the Girondins. During the political crisis of June 1793, the Girondin deputies were expelled from the Convention (see page 108) for supporting revolts backed by royalists, aimed at destroying the unity of the Republic. In fact, both sides believed in the unity of the Republic and the revolts had, initially, nothing to do with royalism or counter-revolution. The Montagnards called these revolts '**federalism**', and were concerned that not only was the unity of the Republic under threat, but that with fighting a war as well, the government's resources would be placed under very severe strain.

In many departments the rebels resented the influence of Paris and its Commune over the Convention and the power of the Jacobins. The first significant city to rebel was Marseille. Its inhabitants turned against the local Jacobin club. Encouraged by these events, anti-Jacobin supporters took control of many other towns and cities in the south. The most serious revolt occurred in Lyon (30 May) – the Republic's second city. Bordeaux reacted to the purge of the Girondin deputies by declaring the city in revolt until they were restored.

Some form of disturbance occurred in 60 of the 83 departments, although there was significant resistance to the Convention in only eight. Potentially the most serious revolt was in the great

Key term

Federalism
A rejection of the central authority of the State in favour of regional authority.

naval base of Toulon. Disillusion with the war and the course of the Revolution led to an uprising which overthrew the town council and closed down the Jacobin club. The government cut off food supplies to the city. To prevent starvation the town authorities negotiated with the British, who insisted that the monarchy be restored. British troops entered the town on 28 August. As half the French fleet was lying off the coast at Toulon, this was a most serious blow to the Republic.

Once the towns of Marseille, Lyon and Toulon rejected the authority of the Convention, many smaller towns in the Rhône valley and Provence followed suit. Despite the attempts of the Jacobin press to portray them as pro-Church monarchists, many of the federalists were supporters of the Republic. According to rebels in Toulon all they wanted was 'to enjoy our goods, our property, the fruits of our toil and industry in peace, yet we see them incessantly exposed to threats from those who have nothing themselves'. However, 'Federal' forces were pitifully small. Marseille was able to raise only 3500 men, Bordeaux 400, and none of them wanted to move far from home. This failure to co-operate enabled the government to pick off the rebel areas one by one.

The New Committee of Public Safety

After 2 June most deputies feared and distrusted the Montagnards because of the way they had dealt with the Girondin. However, they did not want to see the Republic overthrown by domestic or foreign enemies and so, for the next 14 months, they were

Key question

What was the composition of the new Committee of Public Safety?

Table 5.1: Leading members of the Committee of Public Safety

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Fate</i>
Barère	Spokesman for the CPS	Tried, sentenced to deportation, escaped d.1841
Collot d'Herbois	Responsible for repression in Lyon	Deported to Guiana d. 1796
Billaud-Varenne	Extreme left-winger	Deported to Guiana where he later settled d.1819
Carnot	Organised movement of supplies	Returned to private life d.1823
Couthon	Involved in repression of Lyon	Executed after <i>Coup</i> of Thermidor 1794
Lindet	Implemented General Maximum	Retired to private life d.1825
Saint-Just	Drew up Constitution 1793	Executed after <i>Coup</i> of Thermidor 1794
Danton	Urged slowing down of Terror	Executed April 1794
Robespierre	Leading figure in CPS	Executed after <i>Coup</i> of Thermidor 1794
Hérault de Séchelles	Moderate, linked to plots	Executed April 1794

reluctant accomplices of the Montagnards' Jacobin minority. When a new CPS was formed between July and September 1793, the 12 members were all either Montagnards, or deputies of the Plain who had joined them. All were middle class, except for Hérault de Séchelles, who was a former noble. Eight of them were lawyers, two were engineers. Nearly all were young: the average age was just 30. There was no chairman: all the members were jointly responsible for the Committee's actions. The new Committee was to become the first strong government since the Revolution began.

Key question
How did Robespierre justify the Terror?

Maximilian Robespierre

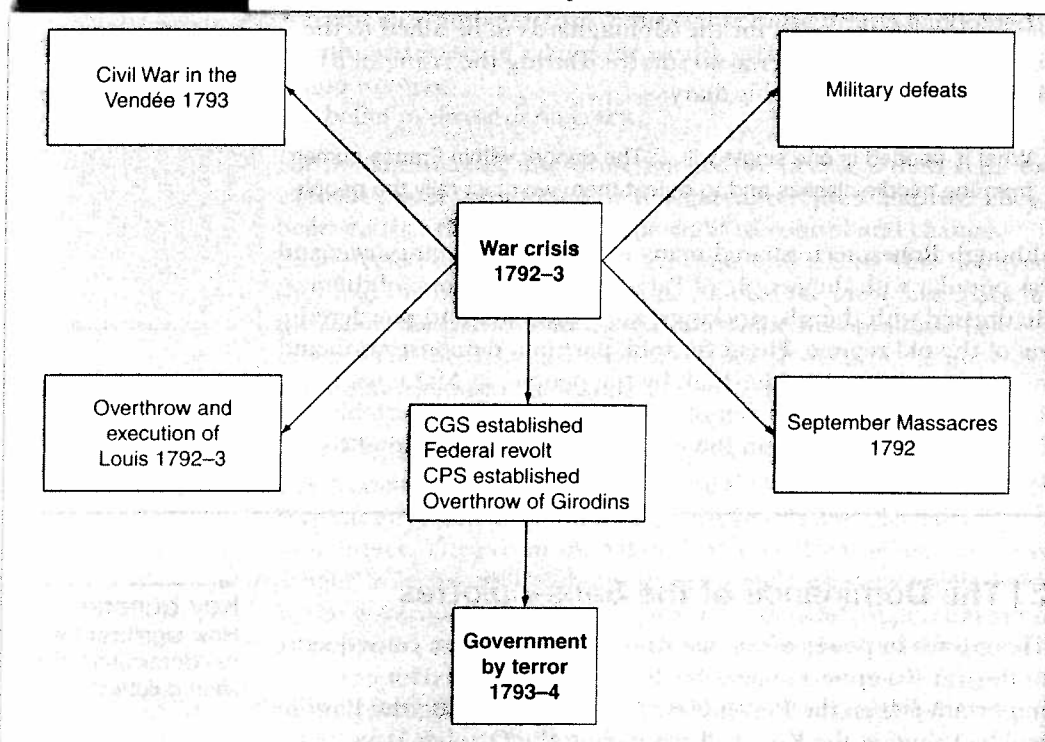
Maximilian Robespierre joined the CPS on 27 July 1793. Owing to his influence in the Jacobin Club and the Commune, he was expected to provide a link between the middle-class Jacobins and the *sans-culottes*. He never had much support in the Convention and many could not stand his narrow self-righteousness. Yet he was known as 'the Incorruptible' because he did not seek power or wealth for himself and was consistent in putting the good of the country above all other considerations. Some have described him as 'a moral fanatic', because his love of '*vertu*' swept aside all human feelings, as when he wrote:

The spirit of the Republic is virtue, in other words love of one's country, that magnanimous devotion that sinks all private interests in the general interest.

Key term

Vertu
'Virtue' – meaning moral excellence.

Summary diagram: The emergence of government by terror



Profile: Maximilian Robespierre 1758–94

- 1758 – Born into a bourgeois family in Arras
- 1769 – Educated at prestigious College Louis-le-Grand at Paris
- 1781 – Returns to Arras from Paris to practise as a barrister
- 1789 – Elected deputy for the Third Estate of Artois
 - Joins the Breton (later Jacobin) Club
- 1790 – Champions the cause of popular liberty
- 1791 – Elected public prosecutor of Paris criminal tribunal
 - Opposes calls for war
- 1792 – Demands deposing the King
 - Elected to the National Convention
- 1793 – Joins the CPS
- 1794 – Takes over police bureau
 - Speech on the Supreme Being
 - Attempted assassination
 - Elected speaker of National Convention
 - Calls for purge of those hostile to Revolution
 - Overthrown during *Coup* of Thermidor, executed



Robespierre believed that principles were everything, human beings nothing. Anyone who did not put *vertu* first would have to be sacrificed:

Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe and inflexible; it is therefore an essence of virtue ... Break the enemies of liberty with terror, and you will be justified as founders of the Republic.

It was Robespierre's tactical skill that led him to ally with the *sans-culottes*. He saw the need for the Montagnards to be allied to the people if the Revolution was to survive. During the rising of 31 May–2 June he wrote in his diary:

What is needed is one single will ... The danger within France comes from the middle classes and to defeat them we must rally the people.

Although Robespierre shared many ideas with the *sans-culottes* and was popular with the people of Paris, he was never one of them. He dressed with the silk stockings, knee-breeches and powdered wig of the old regime. He never took part in a demonstration and was never carried shoulder-high by the people, as Marat was. Robespierre was a rather remote figure who lived comfortably, though rather modestly, in the *petit*-bourgeois household of the cabinet-maker Duplay.

2 | The Dominance of the *Sans-culottes*

The growth in power of the *sans-culottes* was largely a consequence of the war (Chapter 4, pages 85–8). They had played an important role in the Revolution in 1789 by storming the Bastille and by bringing the King to Paris during the October Days, but

Key question

How significant was the domination of the *sans-culottes*?

Key terms

Militants

Those who differed from ordinary *sans-culottes* in that they adopted an extreme political position such as arguing for a republic, greater democracy and the destruction of privilege.

Egalitarianism

Derived from 'equality' – the aim to have all citizens equal, with no disparities in wealth status, or opportunity.

'Certificates of citizenship'

Proof of good citizenship and support for the Republic, without which no-one could be employed.

after that the bourgeois National Guard kept them under control, as at the Champ de Mars.

However, when the National Guard was opened up to 'passive citizens' in July 1792 (page 86) the *sans-culottes* **militants** grew in influence. Their power and domination was important in the overthrow of the monarchy and from the summer of 1792 to the spring of 1794 no-one could control Paris without obtaining their support. They were responsible for the *journée* of 31 May–2 June 1793, which brought the Jacobins to power.

Ideas and organisation

Who were the *sans-culottes*? Their own view of themselves in a contemporary document notes:

A sans-culotte? He's a man who goes everywhere on foot, who has none of the millions you're all after, no mansions, no servants and who lives simply on the fourth or fifth floor. In the evening he's at his section to support sound resolutions. A *sans-culotte* always keeps his sword sharp. At the first roll of the drum off he goes to the Vendée or the armée du Nord.

The main characteristics of the *sans-culottes* were:

- hatred of the aristocracy and anyone of great wealth
- **egalitarianism** – they addressed everyone as citizen and *ancien régime* titles were rejected
- the wearing of red caps (*bonnet rouge*), originally associated with freed slaves, symbolising the equality of all citizens, to which they were firmly committed
- passionate anti-clericism – this was because priests had joined with aristocrats in taking the wealth created by ordinary men and women
- a belief in direct democracy.

For the *sans-culottes*, the sovereignty of the people – their right to exercise power – could not be delegated to representatives. They believed that the people had the right to control and change their elected representative at any time, and if they were betrayed they had the right of insurrection. Political life must take place in the open: the patriot had no reason to hide his opinions. The meetings of the Assembly must therefore be open to the public and deputies must vote aloud.

The Paris Sections

The Commune and the Sections were the administrative units of Parisian local government, with their officials and elected committees. They controlled the National Guard. While there was danger from internal and foreign enemies, they were encouraged by the government, as they helped the war effort, kept a watch on suspects and assisted representatives-on-mission in purging local authorities. In 1793 they were often more important than the municipalities, as they issued '**certificates of citizenship**'.

Each Section was controlled by a small minority of militants, usually the better-off members, who had the time to devote to Section business. Of the 454 members of the Revolutionary Committees in Paris in 1793–4, 65 per cent were shopkeepers, small workshop masters and independent craftsmen while only eight per cent were wage-earners. They exercised power through their own institutions, which were not responsible to the central government.

The Parisian *sans-culottes* had the force with which to seize power but they chose to persuade or intimidate the Convention, never to replace it. They wholeheartedly supported the government on basic issues, such as their hatred of the aristocracy and in their determination to win the war.

Concessions to the *sans-culottes*

As the *sans-culottes* had put the Jacobins in power a series of concessions were made to them:

- A new Constitution was presented to the people on 24 June 1793, which recognised many of their aspirations, preceded by a Declaration of Rights, which went much further than that of 1789. It stated the rights of people to work, to have assistance in time of need and to be educated. The right of insurrection was proclaimed. All adult males were to have the vote and there were to be direct elections.
- To fight the war effectively, the Sections demanded conscription. This was part of the *levée en masse*.
- Economic concessions – the maximum legislation to fix prices, making the hoarding of goods a capital offence, anti-hoarding laws (page 116).

The *levée en masse*

The *levée en masse*, which was decreed on 23 August 1793, marked the appearance of **total war**. It stated that 'Until the enemies of France have been expelled from the territory of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in a state of permanent requisition for the army'.

Nearly half a million conscripts, unmarried men between 18 and 25, were called up to the army. They had to be fed, armed and trained, so all the human and material resources of the nation were put at the government's disposal. State factories were set up to make arms and ammunition. Church bells were melted down for cannon and religious vessels, such as chalices, for coinage. The government also took control of foreign trade and shipping. Government control of the economy harnessed the energies of the nation on an unprecedented scale. It was remarkably successful in the short term: without it victory would have been impossible.

Following a series of meetings among leading Montagnards, a Constitution was drawn up on which the primary assemblies were invited to vote. The results, which were announced in August 1793, approved the new Constitution: 24 June 1793

Key date

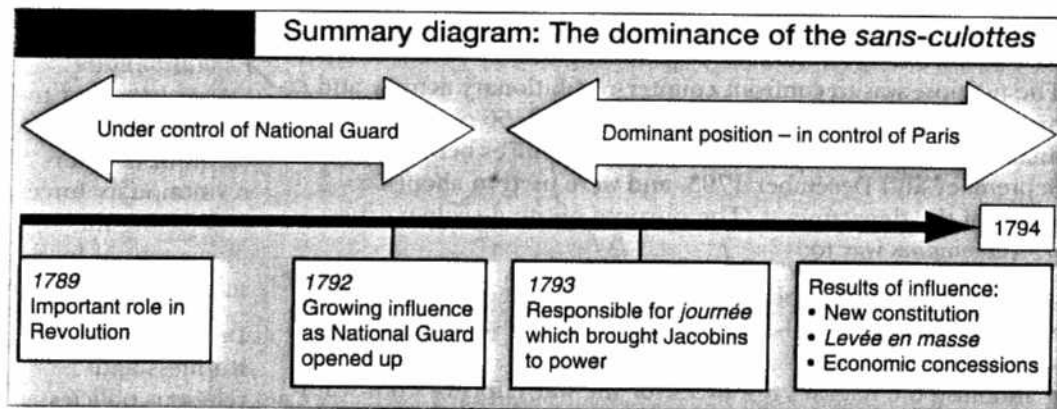
Levée en masse

Compelled citizens to perform duties to defend the Republic – military service for single men, married men to move supplies, women to manufacture uniforms. Buildings and horses were taken over for military use.

Total war

All aspects of the State – population, economy, buildings – were used by the government to try and ensure victory.

Key terms



3 | The Impact of the Terror

The firm line imposed by the Jacobin government over most of France did ensure the survival of the Republic in the medium term. Yet many champions of the poor were alarmed that their economic position was getting worse, not better. This section illustrates a much more radical approach to dealing with this issue.

Key question
Why was Jacques Roux considered to be a threat?

The *Enragés*

The economic situation continued to deteriorate in the summer of 1793. In mid-August the *assignat* was below a third of its face value and drought reduced the grain supplies into Paris by three-quarters.

One group, the *Enragés*, and their spokesman Jacques Roux demanded action from the government. As a priest in one of the poorest quarters of Paris, Roux was shocked by what he saw: people starving in crowded attics. These were people for whom the Revolution had brought very little material improvement to their standard of living. His followers were wage-earners, casual labourers, the poor and unemployed. He wanted the Convention to deal immediately with starvation and poverty and when it did nothing, he denounced it. His programme was Economic Terror; he demanded the execution of **hoarders** who pushed up the price of grain and a purge of ex-nobles from the army. Robespierre wanted to destroy him, because he was threatening the Commune and the Convention with direct action in the streets. Roux was an influential figure in the *journée* of 5 September 1793, which adopted a new more extreme approach to ensure the movement of food into Paris. Roux was arrested during the course of the *journée* and after several months in prison he took his own life in February 1794.

Key term
Hoarders
Those who bought up supplies of food, keeping them until prices rose and then selling them at a large profit.

Key question
What was the purpose behind setting up the '*armée révolutionnaire*'?

The *armée révolutionnaire*

On 4 September a crowd gathered before the Hôtel de Ville to demand bread and higher wages. The following day, urged on by Roux, it marched on the Convention, forcing it to accept a series of radical measures. The Sections imposed on the Convention the proclamation of 'Terror as the order of the day'.

The Convention immediately authorised the formation of a Parisian '*armée révolutionnaire*' consisting mainly of *sans-culottes*. The purpose was to confront counter-revolutionary activity and organise the defence of the Republic. In total, 56 other unauthorised armies were set up in the provinces between September and December 1793, and were used in about two-thirds of the departments. The purpose of these civilian *armées révolutionnaires* was to:

- ensure the food supplies of Paris and the large provincial cities
- round up deserters, hoarders, refractory priests, religious 'fanatics', political suspects and royalist rebels
- mobilise the nation's resources for the war effort by confiscating church silver and bells
- establish revolutionary 'justice' in the areas of the south and west, which had shown little enthusiasm for the Revolution.

The operation of the Parisian army extended over 25 departments. Its main task was to ensure the capital's food supplies by requisitions in the major grain-producing areas of the north. A third of its men took part in the savage repression of the federal revolt at Lyon. Both the Parisian and provincial armies were engaged in **dechristianisation** (see page 121).

The Parisian army was remarkably successful in supplying Paris with bread until the spring of 1794, and so helped to preserve the Revolution. The provincial armies also did a good job in supplying major towns and the regular army on the eastern frontier. Their success, however, was unlikely to last, because their numbers were small and they met enormous hostility from the rural population. There was great joy in the countryside when they were disbanded. The CPS did not like the revolutionary armies because they were anarchic and outside the control of the authorities. They also disliked them because they created opposition to the Revolution by their heavy-handed methods in dealing with the peasants.

Economic Terror

The Convention had bowed to popular pressure from Roux and the *sans-culottes* in July by passing a law that imposed the death penalty for hoarding food and other supplies. On 29 September 1793 the law of the **General Maximum** was passed to control prices. It fixed the price of bread and many essential goods and services at one-third above the prices of June 1790. Wages, which largely determined prices, were also fixed at 50 per cent above the level of 1790. When peasants refused to sell grain at the maximum price that was set, the government was compelled to requisition supplies.

The Maximum divided the common people against each other. Peasants hated it because the rate was often below the cost of production, while the *sans-culottes* wanted it so that they could afford to buy bread. When *sans-culottes* went into the countryside with the *armée révolutionnaire* to enforce the Maximum they clashed with the peasants and the conflict between town and

Armée révolutionnaire

Sans-culottes sent to the provinces to confront counter-revolutionary forces and ensure the movement of food supplies.

Dechristianisation

Ruthless anti-religious policies conducted by some Jacobin supporters against the Church – aimed at destroying its influence.

General Maximum

Tables that fix the prices of a wide range of foods and commodities.

Key question

What was the impact of the Maximum laws?

Introduction of the General Maximum to control prices and wages: 29 September 1793

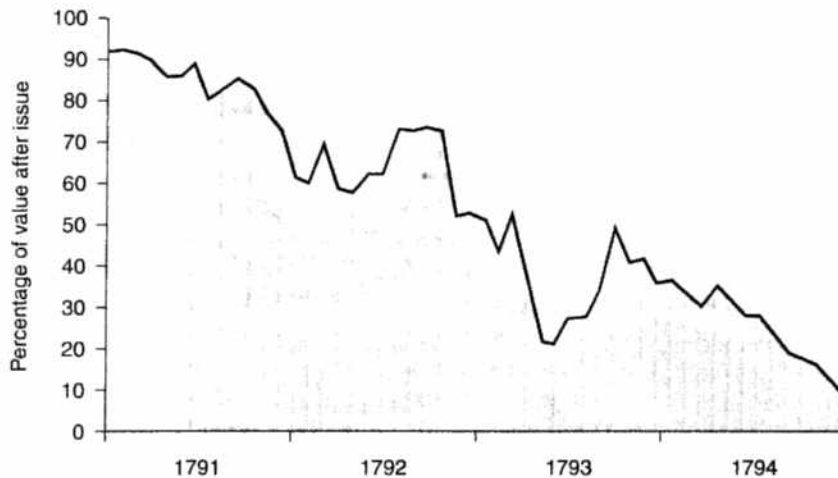


Figure 5.1: The declining value of the *assignat*. How do you think ordinary people would react to the declining value of the *assignat*?

country was deepened. The government was in a difficult position, as farmers would simply stop sowing if they could not make a profit. The co-operation of the wealthy peasants, who controlled most of the harvest, was necessary for the government. After all, they were the municipal councillors and tax collectors, who were expected to oversee requisitioning. Thus, where there was no local revolutionary army in the countryside, the Maximum had to be imposed by the rich.

To meet the concerns of farmers and other producers, the government revised prices upwards in February 1794, much to the disgust of the *sans-culottes*. In the short term, the government's measures were successful. The towns and armies were fed and the *assignat*, worth 22 per cent of its face value in August, rose to 48 per cent in December 1793 (see Figure 5.1 above).

Key question
What were the main aspects of the Political Terror?

The Political Terror

In October 1793, on the recommendation of the CPS, the recently approved Constitution was suspended and it was decreed that 'The government of France will be Revolutionary until the peace'. This paved the way for the adoption of extreme policies. The Political Terror took three forms:

1. The official Terror, controlled by the CPS and CGS, centred in Paris and whose victims came before the Revolutionary Tribunal.
2. The Terror in the areas of federal revolt such as the Vendée and Lyon, where the worst atrocities took place.
3. The Terror in other parts of France, under the control of watch committees, representatives-on-mission and the revolutionary armies.

The CGS was largely responsible for bringing cases before the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris. Up to September 1793 the

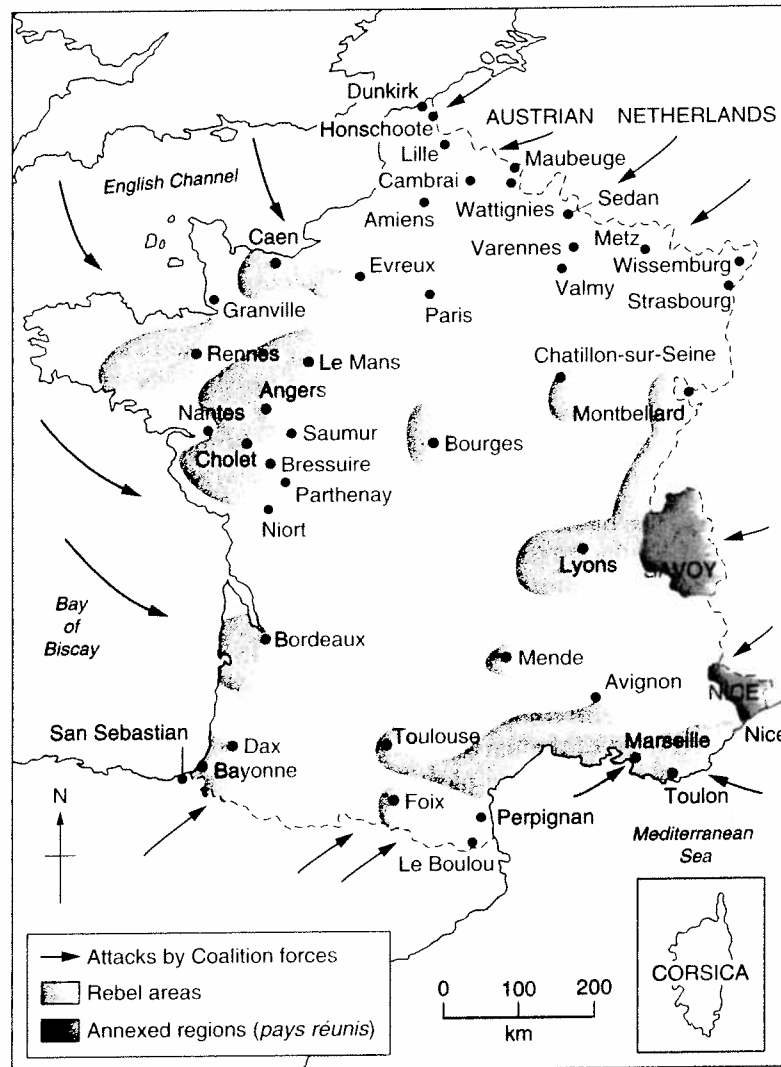


Figure 5.2: The Republic under siege July–August 1793. Note the extent of the external threat from coalition forces and the rebel areas, which are, in most instances, on the margins of the country where there was the possibility that they could be reinforced by the external enemies of the Republic.

Tribunal had heard 260 cases and pronounced 66 death sentences (25 per cent of the total). A series of celebrity trials were held which were popular with the masses and removed those regarded as enemies of the Republic. The trial of important figures almost always resulted in their execution. Acquittal would have been regarded as a vote of no confidence in the government. The Revolutionary Tribunal became the scene of many famous trials and death sentences: Marie Antoinette on 16 October, 20 leading Girondin deputies on 31 October, Philippe Égalité (formerly known as the Duke of Orleans) on 6 November and Mme Roland, wife of the Girondin ex-minister, three days later.

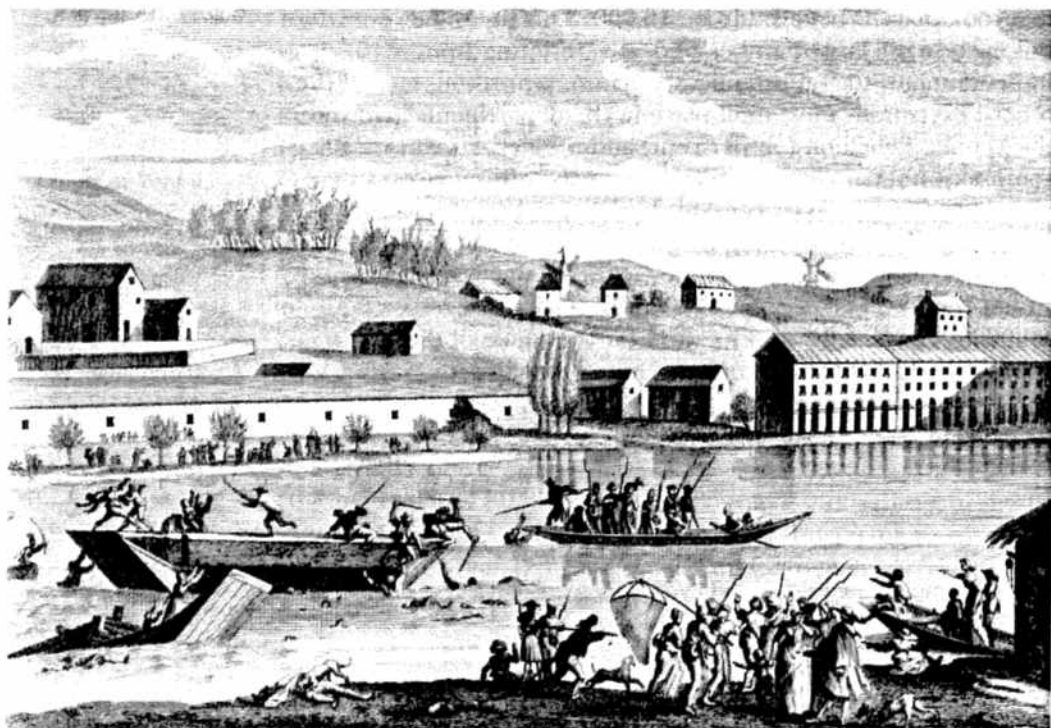
Key question

What measures were used in the provinces to restore the authority of the government?

Provincial repression

By the end of 1793, the federal revolt had been suppressed by the regular army. Marseille, Lyon and Toulon were taken and the Vendéan rebels crushed. Repression followed. From January to May 1794, troops moved through the area, shooting almost every peasant they met, burning their farms and crops and killing their animals. Women were raped and mutilated. When the 'pacification' was over, the Vendée was a depopulated wasteland. Thousands who surrendered crammed the prisons. They could not be released in case they re-joined the rebels, and were shot without trial – 2000 near Angers alone. In the 10 departments involved in the Vendée rebellion, revolutionary courts condemned some 8700 people, just over half the 16,600 executions in France during the Terror. Most were ordinary peasants, few were bourgeois.

Representatives-on-mission and the revolutionary armies were often responsible for the worst atrocities. Their actions were fully supported and, indeed, encouraged by the government. At Nantes, the representative Carrier carried out the dreadful *noyades* (drownings) by placing 1800 people, nearly half of them women, into barges, which were taken to the mouth of the Loire and sunk. In Toulon 800 were shot without trial and a further 282 were sent to the guillotine by a Revolutionary Commission. Lyon, the second city in France, was to pay dearly for its rebellion. On 12 October 1793, the Committee of Public Safety ordered the destruction of Lyon. Collot-d'Herbois, a member of the CPS and



Print of the drowning of priests in the River Loire at Nantes, November 1793. Which side in the civil war do you think published this print?

a representative-on-mission, restored order in Lyon with great brutality: 1900 victims were either mown down by cannon fire in front of large pits during the *mitraille* or guillotined. A total of 72 per cent of the executions during the Terror (12,000 victims) took place in these rebel areas of the west and south-east, which covered 16 departments.

Law of Suspects

In September 1793 the **Law of Suspects** was passed. Under this law the government delegated some of its powers to local revolutionary committees. These committees were packed with fanatical Montagnards and their supporters. They worked closely with representatives-on-mission and the revolutionary armies to deal with counter-revolutionary activity. Mass arrest of suspects took place (about half a million according to one estimate, of whom 10,000 died in prison). The committees could also send offenders before one of the Revolutionary Tribunals, and purge the local administration, removing moderates and replacing them by *sans-culottes* militants. These committees symbolised the Terror at the local level. By the end of 1793 most rural communes had one. They were the one permanent institution of the Terror in the countryside.

The Law of Suspects

Anyone suspected of counter-revolutionary activity and undermining the Republic could be arrested and held without trial indefinitely.

Key term

The extent of the Terror

Estimating the human cost of the Terror is difficult because of the absence of reliable figures, which vary from several hundred thousand to tens of thousands. The number of official executions that took place is believed to be 16,600. This figure however does not include the large number of deaths resulting from, imprisonment, starvation, military action, repression, etc. Of the official executions most took place in the departments involved in the Vendée Rebellion (53 per cent) and the departments in the south-east (20 per cent). In social terms the official victims were mainly peasants (28 per cent) and urban workers (31 per cent), with the nobility accounting for just 8 per cent of the total. What is clear is that the majority of the victims of the Terror perished in the Vendée. The historian Douglas Johnson suggests a figure of 80,000 deaths for the Vendée, and for the whole of the west a round figure of 200,000 would seem to be realistic.

Key question

What is significant about the figures relating to deaths during the Terror?

Table 5.2: Official executions by region during the Terror

Region	No. of deaths	%
Paris	2,639	15.9
Area of the Vendée rebellion	8,713	52.5
Area of armed federalism round Lyon	1,967	11.9
Area of armed federalism in the Midi	1,296	7.8
Other areas	1,979	11.9
Total	16,594	100.0

Key question
What was the impact
of dechristianisation
campaign?

Religious Terror: dechristianisation

Dechristianisation was not the official policy of the central government. The main impulse for the campaign came from the *sans-culottes* in the Paris Commune, the revolutionary armies and the representatives-on-mission. They hated Catholicism, which they felt had betrayed the Revolution and fermented the cause of the counter-revolution. The Convention was drawn along with it.

Dechristianisation was a deliberate attempt by the First Republic between 1792 and 1794 to use the resources of the State to destroy Christianity as the dominant cultural form of French society. Like the abolition of the monarchy, the destruction of churches was a symbol of the revolutionaries' determination to destroy everything connected with the *ancien régime*.

The attack on the Church took various forms. Churches were closed, church bells and silver were removed, roadside shrines and crosses were destroyed. The Paris Commune stopped paying clerical salaries in May 1793 and in November ordered that all churches in Paris should be closed. Notre Dame became a Temple of Reason. Other areas of France rapidly followed the lead of Paris so that by the spring of 1794 most of the country's churches had been closed.

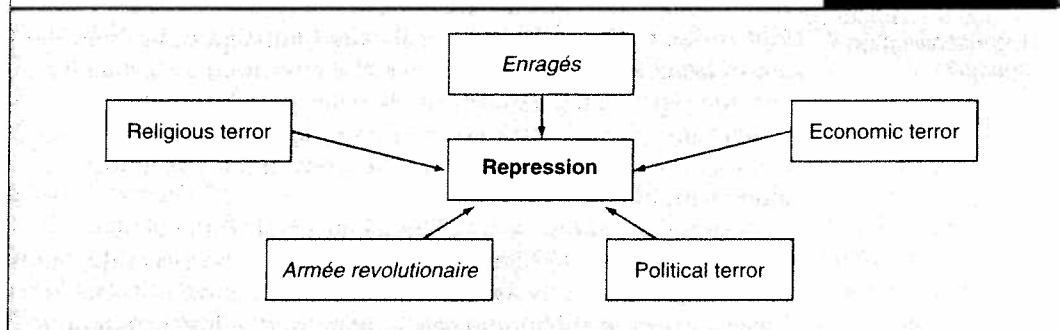
Priests were forced to renounce their priesthood and many were compelled to marry. Estimates of the number of priests who gave up their calling vary from about 6000 (10 per cent of all constitutional priests) to 20,000. This brutal attempt to uproot centuries of Christian belief was deeply resented in the villages. For many ordinary people outside the civil war zones, dechristianisation, which left large areas of France without priests, was the aspect of the Terror that most affected them.

Revolutionary calendar

On 5 October 1793 a new revolutionary calendar was introduced. It was dated from 22 September 1792, when the Republic was proclaimed. Thus the period from 22 September 1792 to 21 September 1793 became Year 1. The year was divided into 12 months of 30 days, with five supplementary days (soon called *sans-culottides*). Each month was divided into three periods of 10 days, every tenth day (*decadi*) being a day of rest. Another decree gave each month a name appropriate to its season: thus Vendémiaire (the month of vintage) ran from 22 September to 21 October, Floréal (the month of flowers) from 20 April to 19 May. The new calendar ignored Sundays and festivals of the Church. In the new calendar the period of the Terror roughly coincided with Year II, which started on 22 September 1793.

Key dates
The start of Year II, which is closely identified with the Terror: 22 September 1793
A new revolutionary calendar and form of dating was introduced which rejected the Christian calendar: 5 October 1793

Summary diagram: The impact of the Terror



4 | The Dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety

Towards the end of 1793 the government had begun to overcome the problems that had threatened the existence of the Republic:

- the federal revolts had been crushed
- food supplies were moving into towns and cities
- the value of the *assignat* was rising
- in the west, the defeats of the rebels at Cholet and Le Mans effectively ended the civil war in the Vendée
- French armies were also doing well in the war. By the end of September they had driven the Spanish armies out of Roussillon and the Piedmontese out of Savoy. The British were defeated at Hondschoote in the same month and the Austrians at Wattignies in October.

It appeared that the CPS's policy for defending France was proving to be successful. With renewed confidence the Convention's Committees could now begin to claw back much of the power which had passed to the *sans-culottes* and their organisations.

Restoring government authority

At some stage it was likely that the government and the *sans-culottes* would come into conflict. There was administrative confusion in many departments in the autumn of 1793 as local revolutionary committees, revolutionary armies and representative-on-mission, such as Fouché and Carrier, interpreted the law, or ignored it, on a whim. The government could not tolerate anarchy indefinitely as it undermined its authority. Yet it had to act carefully in case it upset its supporters among the *sans-culottes*.

The first steps to tame the popular movement were taken in September 1793. The Convention decided that the general assemblies of the Sections should meet only twice a week. In October the Convention passed a decree that government was to be 'revolutionary until the peace'. This meant the suspension of the Constitution of 1793. Although this was planned to be a temporary measure, the Constitution was never put into operation.

Key question
How did the government restore its authority?

Key date

The law of 14
Frimaire establishes
revolutionary
government:
4 December 1793

The Law of Revolutionary Government

A major step to restore central control was taken on 4 December 1793 when the law of Frimaire established revolutionary government. This law gave the two Committees full executive powers.

- The CGS was responsible for police and internal security. The Revolutionary Tribunal, as well as the surveillance committees, came under its control.
- The CPS had more extensive powers. In addition to controlling ministers and generals, it was to control foreign policy and purge and direct local government.

Key term

Agents nationaux
National agents
appointed by, and
responsible to,
the central
government. Their
role was to monitor
the enforcement of
all revolutionary
laws.

The chief officials of the communes and departments, who had been elected, were placed under **agents nationaux**. The representatives-on-mission, sent out by the Convention in April, were now put firmly under the control of the CPS. All revolutionary armies, except that in Paris, were to be disbanded. As Robespierre pointed out: 'Revolutionary Government ... has no room for anarchy and disorder. It is not directed by individual feelings, but by the public interest. It is necessary to navigate between two rocks; weakness and boldness, reaction and extremism.'

The new policies resulted in:

- the end of anarchy
- breaking the power of the *sans-culottes*
- providing France with her first strong government since 1787.

However, it rejected many of the principles of 1789. The Constitutions of 1791 and 1793 had established de-centralisation, elections to all posts, the separation of legislative from executive power and impartial justice. Now all this was reversed. Robespierre justified the policy by arguing that a dictatorship was necessary until the foreign and internal enemies of the Revolution were destroyed. 'We must', he said, 'organise the despotism of liberty to crush the despotism of kings'. This was contrary to the ideas of democracy and people's rights he had advocated before he took office.

Key question

How did the
government deal with
opposition?

Opposition to the government – Hébert

The main challenge to the revolutionary government came from within the ranks of its former supporters. 'Left' opposition came from the publisher Jacques Hébert and his followers. His newspaper *Le Père Duchesne* demanded that more hoarders should be executed and property redistributed. This was very popular with the *sans-culottes*. The Hébertistes had few supporters in the Convention but many in the Cordeliers Club, the Commune, the Paris revolutionary army and the popular societies. Robespierre disliked their political extremism, particularly their leading part in the dechristianisation campaign, which turned Catholics against the Revolution. When Hébert called for an insurrection at the beginning of March 1794 he was arrested along with 18 supporters. They were accused of being foreign agents who wanted a military dictatorship that would then

prepare the way for a restored monarchy. The populace was taken in by this government propaganda. When the Hébertistes were guillotined on 24 March 1794, Paris remained calm.

The CPS took advantage of the situation to strengthen its dictatorship. The Parisian revolutionary army was disbanded, the Cordeliers Club was closed and popular societies were forced to disband. The Commune was purged and filled with supporters of Robespierre. Representatives-on-mission, responsible for some of the worst atrocities in the provinces, were recalled to Paris.

Opposition to the government – Danton

Of greater significance, because of the higher profile of its leader, was the opposition of the Right. This centred around Danton (see Profile on page 125), a former colleague of Robespierre, and a leading Montagnard/Jacobin. In order to heal the divisions in the revolutionary movement, the **Indulgents** wanted to halt the Terror and the centralisation imposed in December. To do this, Danton argued that the war would have to come to an end, as it was largely responsible for the Terror. Since leaving office he had become very wealthy. It was not clear where his new-found wealth came from. Nearly 400,000 *livres* were unaccounted for at the Ministry of Justice while he was in charge. He was accused of bribery and corruption. Danton's friend, Camille Desmoulins, supported him in his desire to end the Terror. In his newspaper *Le Vieux Cordelier* in December 1793, Desmoulins called for the release of '200,000 citizens who are called suspects'.

Since Danton, unlike Hébert, had a large following in the Convention, he was regarded as a much more serious threat by the CPS. His call for peace and an end to the Terror would, they felt, leave the door open for a return of the monarchy. He was, therefore, brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal on charges based on his political record and on 5 April 1794 was executed with many of his followers, including Desmoulins. The Terror now seemed to have a momentum of its own. The members of the Committees had become brutalised and acted vindictively in ways that would have shamed them only two years earlier. Desmoulins' wife tried to organise a demonstration in his support. She was arrested and in April went to the scaffold, along with the wife of Hébert. They could not in any way be regarded as presenting a threat to the Committee.

The effect of the fall of Hébert and Danton was to stifle all criticism of the CPS. Everyone lived in an atmosphere of hatred and suspicion, in which deputies were afraid to say anything, because an unguarded word could lead to a death sentence.

The Great Terror

The Great Terror was centred on Paris and lasted from 10 June until 27 July. In order to control all repression, the government in May 1794 abolished the provincial Revolutionary Tribunals. All enemies of the Republic had now to be brought to Paris, to be tried by the cities Revolutionary Tribunal. This did not mean that the Terror would become less severe. Although the 'factions' of

Execution of Hébert and his leading supporters: 24 March 1794

Key date

Indulgents

The name given to Danton, Desmoulins and their supporters who wished to see a relaxation of the Terror.

Key term

Key question

What does the Law of Prairial indicate about revolutionary justice?

**Profile: George Jacques Danton 1759–94**

- 1759 – Born into a bourgeois family in Arcis-sur-Aube
- 1785 – Called to the Bar
- 1789 – Appointed President of the Cordeliers Club
- 1791 – Administrator of the Department of Paris
 - Assistant *Procurateur* of the Commune
- 1792 – Appointed Minister of Justice
 - Elected deputy to the Convention
 - First Mission to Belgium
- 1793 – Joins the CPS
 - Retires to country because of ill health
 - Returns to Paris
 - Urges the slowing down of the 'Terror'
- 1794 – Labelled by his enemies as an Indulgent, arrested and executed

Danton was one of the most controversial figures of the Revolution. He was loathed and loved in almost equal measure. Many hated him because he was suspected of being corrupt, untrustworthy and in the pay of the royal family. Others loved him for his vast energy, determination and fine oratory. As Minister of Justice he delivered a rousing speech calling for the defence of the nation, after the fall of Verdun to the Prussians (September 1792):

The tocsin [bell] that we are going to sound is no alarm bell, it is the signal for the charge against the enemies of the fatherland. To vanquish them we must show daring, more daring, and again daring; and France will be saved.

Danton and Hébert had been crushed, some of their supporters were still alive, so the Terror would have to continue until they were eliminated. During the Great Terror, approximately 1594 men and women were executed. Robespierre had no desire to protect the innocent, if this meant dangerous enemies of the Revolution escaped.

Following assassination attempts on Robespierre and Couthon (23 May) they drafted the **Law of Prairial**, which was passed on 10 June 1794. It was directed against 'Enemies of the people' but the definitions were so broad and vague that almost anyone could be included. Under it, no witnesses were to be called and judgment was to be decided by 'the conscience of the jurors' rather than by any evidence produced. Defendants were not allowed defence counsel and the only verdicts possible were death or acquittal. This law removed any semblance of a fair trial and was designed to speed up the process of revolutionary justice. In this it succeeded. More people were sentenced to death in Paris by the Revolutionary Tribunal during June/July 1794 (1594, 59.3 per cent) than in the previous 14 months of its existence. Many of the victims were nobles and clergymen, while nearly a half were members of the wealthier bourgeoisie. No-one dared to make any criticism of the Committee. 'The Revolution is frozen', Saint-Just commented.

Key term

Law of Prairial

The most severe of the laws passed by the revolutionary government. The purpose of the law was to reform the Revolutionary Tribunal in order to secure more convictions. The law paved the way for the Great Terror.

Summary diagram: The main instruments used during the Terror

Measure	Date of introduction	Purpose
CGS	1792 October	Deal with all matters relating to security
<i>Representatives en mission</i>	1793 March	Sent to Departments to enforce war effort
Revolutionary Tribunal	1793 March	Try those accused of counter-revolution
<i>Comités de surveillance</i>	1793 March	Monitor movements of strangers
CPS	1793 April	Effectively the government, passes decrees
First Maximum	1793 May	Fixes the prices of grain
<i>Levée en masse</i>	1793 August	Organise France for total war
Death penalty for hoarders	1793 July	Communes and sections to search for hoarded food
<i>Armée révolutionnaire</i>	1793 September	<i>Sans-culottes</i> sent to provinces
Law of Suspects	1793 September	Anyone suspected of counter-revolution arrested
General Maximum	1793 September	Fixes prices on all foods and goods
Law of revolutionary government	1793 December	Extends and centralises power of CPS
Laws of Ventose	1794 February	Distributes property of suspects to the poor
Law of 22 Prairial	1794 June	Reform of Revolutionary Tribunal to speed up executions

5 | The Overthrow of Robespierre

Robespierre loses support

In the spring and early summer of 1794, Robespierre started to lose support in three key areas:

- among Catholics
- the *sans-culottes*
- on the CPS and CGS.

Catholics

Robespierre believed in God and had a genuine faith in life after death, in which the virtuous would be rewarded. He loathed the dechristianisation campaign of the *sans-culottes*, partly on religious grounds and partly because it upset Catholics and created enemies of the Revolution. He wanted to unite all Frenchmen in a new religion, the **Cult of the Supreme Being**, which he persuaded the Convention to accept in a decree of 7 May 1794. It began: 'The people of France recognises the existence of the Supreme Being and of immortality of the soul'. On 8 June 1794 Robespierre organised in Paris a large 'Festival of the Supreme Being'.

This new religion pleased no-one. Catholics were distressed because it ignored Catholic doctrine, ceremonies and the Pope. Anti-clericals, including most members of the Committee of General Security, opposed it because they thought it was a first step to towards the reintroduction of Roman Catholicism. They

Key question

How did people react to Robespierre's new religion?

Cult of the Supreme Being

Robespierre's alternative civic religion to the Catholic faith.

Key term

felt that Robespierre was setting himself up as the high priest of the new religion.

Key question

Why was Robespierre losing support among the *sans-culottes*?

Sans-culottes

Robespierre's popularity among the *sans-culottes* was falling sharply for a number of reasons:

- the execution of the Hébertistes
- the dissolution of the popular societies
- the end of direct democracy in the Sections
- the raising of the Maximum on prices in March, which led to inflation and a fall in the *assignat* to only 36 per cent of its original value
- the imposing of the Maximum on wages.

While the Commune had been under the control of the Hébertistes it had not applied the Maximum on wages, which had risen considerably above the limit allowed. The government now decided it would have to act, as the profits of manufacturers were disappearing. On 23 July, therefore, the Commune, now staffed by Robespierre's supporters, decided to apply the Maximum to wages. This led to a fall in wages by as much as a half, and heightened discontent amongst the majority of *sans-culottes*, who were wage-earners.

The Great Terror sickened many ordinary people, workers as well as bourgeoisie. By the spring of 1794 the Republic's armies had driven all foreign troops from French soil, recaptured lost territory in Belgium and moved into the Rhineland. On the domestic front internal enemies had been defeated and government authority restored over all parts of the country. Many questioned whether it was still necessary to apply the ruthless policies of the Terror now that the threats to the Republic had been dealt with.

Key question

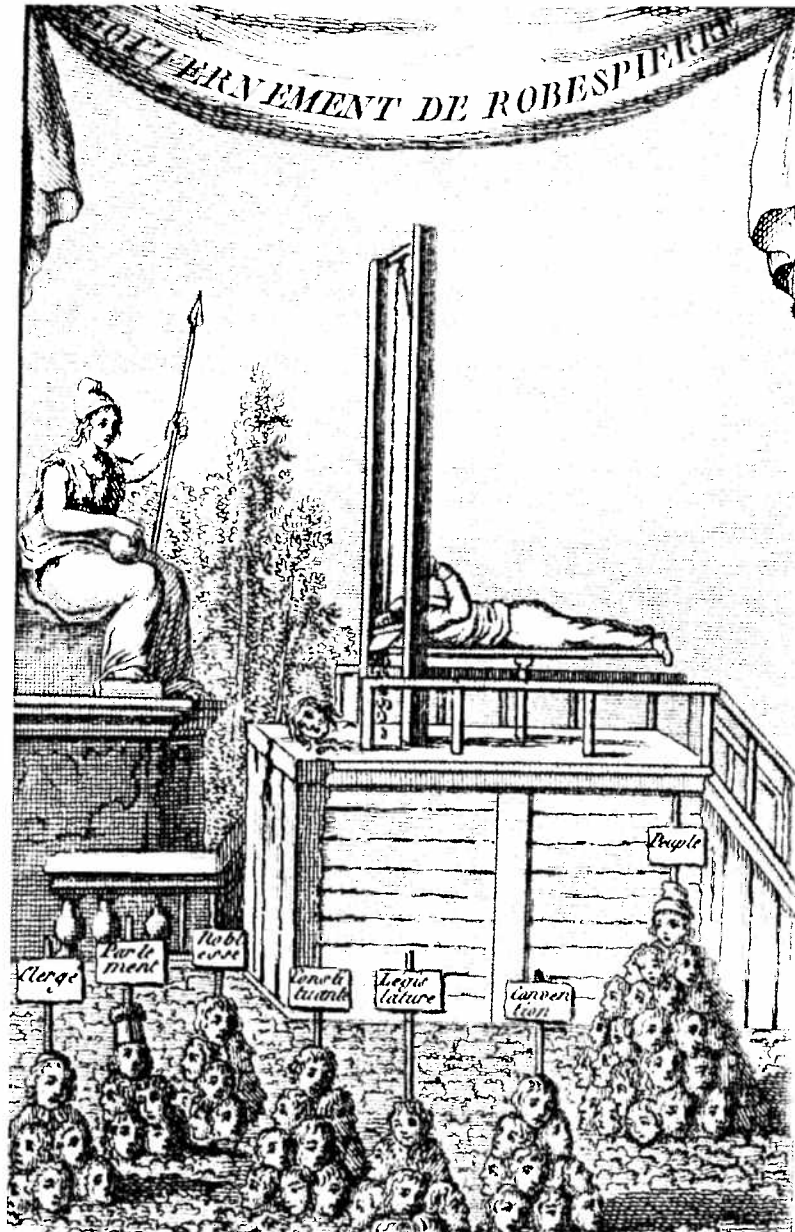
Why did tensions emerge within and between the CPS and the CGS?

CPS and CGS

The dictatorship of the two Committees remained unchallengeable, until they fell out amongst themselves. In April, the CPS set up its own police bureau, with Robespierre in charge, to prosecute dishonest officials. The CGS deeply resented this interference with its own control of internal security, so that the two Committees became rivals rather than allies. There were also conflicts within the CPS. Some members disliked Saint-Just's **Laws of Ventose** (26 February 1794) and made sure they were never put into practice. Two members of the CPS, Billaud and Collot, had been closely attached to Hébert and so felt threatened by Robespierre. Robespierre was especially critical of Collot because of the extreme measures he had used to restore order in Lyon (see pages 119–20). Many on the CPS were becoming suspicious of Robespierre particularly following the introduction of the Cult of the Supreme Being and he was losing support among former allies.

Key term

Laws of Ventose
Property of those recognised as enemies of the Revolution could be seized and distributed among the poor.



An anti-Robespierre cartoon claiming that most of the victims of the Terror were not from the privileged orders but were ordinary people. How does the cartoon seek to portray Robespierre?

The Coup of Thermidor

During these divisions, Robespierre took a month away from public life. He made no speeches in the Convention between 18 June and 26 July, attended the CPS only two or three times and even gave up his work at the bureau of police. It may be that he was worn out, both physically and emotionally, as all the members of the Committee had worked long hours for months without a

Key question
What was the impact of Robespierre's speech to the Convention on 8 Thermidor?

Key dates

Robespierre delivered an important speech in the Convention suggesting that some of its members were plotting to overthrow the government:
26 July 1794

Execution of Robespierre and his leading allies Couthon and Saint-Just:
28 July 1794

Key terms

Thermidor

A month in the new revolutionary calendar equivalent to 19 July–17 August.

Terrorist

An active supporter of the policies of the Terror.

Coup of Thermidor

The overthrow of Robespierre and his closest supporters, which marked the end of the Terror.

break. When he did reappear it was to address the Convention, not the Committee. On 26 July (8 **Thermidor**) he made a speech attacking those colleagues who, he claimed, were plotting against the government. When asked to name them, he declined. This proved to be his undoing. Any denunciation by Robespierre would have resulted in arrest and almost certainly death. Moderates like Carnot and **terrorists** like Fouché and Collot all felt threatened. Fearing that Robespierre was about to denounce them as traitors a number of his former colleagues conspired to plot against him, before he could order their arrest.

Arrest

When Robespierre attempted to speak at the Convention on 9 Thermidor (27 July) he was shouted down. The Convention then voted for the arrest of Robespierre, his brother Augustin, Couthon, Saint-Just and Hanriot, the Commander of the Paris National Guard. They were taken to prisons controlled by the Commune. Robespierre and his colleagues continued to be popular in the Commune, and its leaders ordered all gaolers in Paris to refuse to accept the prisoners and called for an insurrection in their support. Following their release, they ordered the National Guard of the Sections, still under their control, to mobilise. Hanriot was allowed to escape. However, because of the dictatorship established by the two Committees, neither the Jacobin Club nor the Commune could inspire these militants as they had done on 5 September 1792. The CGS now controlled the revolutionary committees of the Sections and the popular societies had been dissolved.

There was great confusion on the evening of 27 July, as the Convention also called on the National Guard to support it against the Commune. Most Sections took no action at first: only 17 (out of 48) sent troops to support the Commune. They included artillery units and for several hours Hanriot had the Convention at his mercy. Only a failure of nerve on his part and Robespierre's strange reluctance to act saved the Convention.

Robespierre had little faith in a popular rising for which no plans had been made and wanted to keep within the law. Barère proposed that the prisoners be declared outlaws on the basis that they had 'escaped'. This meant that they could be executed without a trial. The decree of outlawry and the enforcement of the law persuaded many Sections which were uncertain about who to support to side with the Convention. When they reached the Hôtel de Ville where Robespierre and his supporters were based, they found no one defending it.

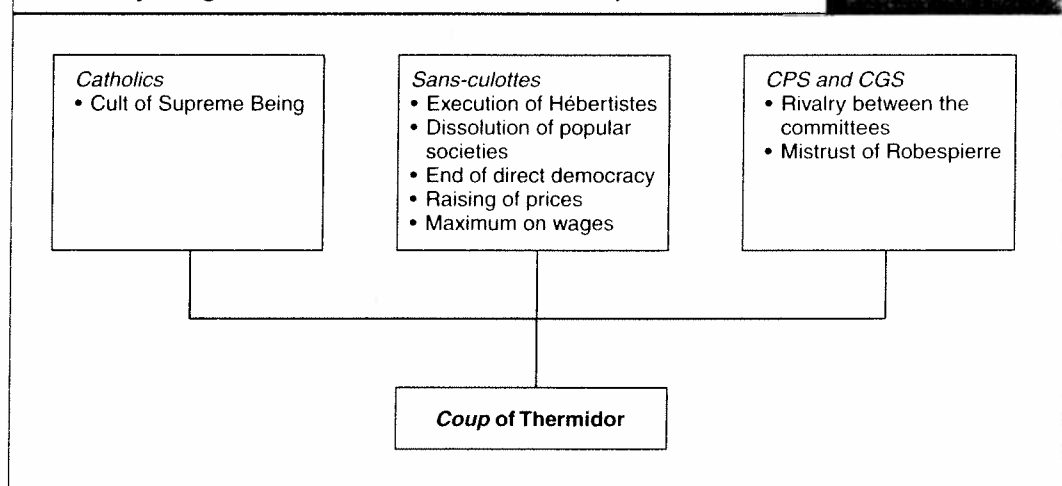
Amid scenes of great confusion, Robespierre, who had tried to shoot himself, and his leading supporters were arrested for a second time. On the 28 July 1794 he and 21 others were executed. In the next few days over 100 members of the Commune followed Robespierre to the scaffold. The events of the **Coup of Thermidor** effectively meant the rejection of government by Terror. The Terror was dead although the violence would continue.

The end of Terror

The *Coup of Thermidor* brought to an end the most dramatic period of the Revolution. Through a combination of policies that were attractive to their core supporters and ruthlessness to their enemies, the Jacobin dictatorship ensured the defeat of the Republic's internal and external enemies. Many of the gains made since 1789 were preserved and even extended. In the course of defeating her enemies, the Republic created a highly motivated citizen army, which laid the foundations for future conquests in Europe. However, these successful aspects were more than balanced by a number of negative features. There was massive loss of life and devastation in the Vendée and the areas of federalist revolt. The extremist policies of the CPS and CGS alienated many Catholics and the bourgeoisie. Even the *sans-culottes* became disillusioned with the extremist policies of the revolutionary government. The ferocity of the reaction to the Terror, which will be dealt with in the next chapter, indicates the depth of hostility felt by large numbers of men and women towards the system created by Robespierre and his allies.

Key question
How successful was the Terror?

Summary diagram: The overthrow of Robespierre



6 | The Key Debate

The political career of Robespierre is indelibly linked to the Terror. Many historians have contributed to the debate on the significance of Robespierre and his role during the Terror. The central question which historians frequently address is:

How important a figure is Maximilian Robespierre in the history of the French Revolution?

Jean Jaurès

The great French socialist politician and historian Jaurès wrote his history of the French Revolution in the early years of the

twentieth century (1901–4). As a leader, he believed Robespierre to be a democrat and supporter of liberty, yet lacking in political vision. Moreover Jaurès considered his importance to be a strange mixture of optimism and pessimism – optimism as regards the moral worth of the people, pessimism as regards the equal distribution of property. While Robespierre deplored poverty he would do nothing to destroy the monopoly of wealth controlled by the *bourgeoisie*.

Richard Cobb

Richard Cobb described Robespierre as a fussy, vaguely ridiculous little man, a consistent winner of second prizes. He considered that his influence on the CPS was weak, but that he was useful to it because of the close links that he maintained with the popular movement and the Jacobins. According to Cobb, Robespierre's importance was in providing the revolutionaries with a sense of purpose, direction and vision. Had Robespierre not existed, it would have made very little difference to the course of the Revolution.

John Hardman

John Hardman argues that Robespierre would never have admitted that he enjoyed exercising power for its own sake. He suggests that his aim was to create a Republic of virtue. The positive aspect of this was the new state religion he introduced – Cult of the Supreme Being. This was balanced, however, by a negative side, which involved the elimination of those who refused to accept his policies. The importance of Robespierre, according to Hardman, was his attempting to unblock or unfreeze the Revolution by actively encouraging its most enthusiastic supporters – the *sans-culottes*.

Alfred Cobban and J.M. Thompson

Alfred Cobban emphasised the three elements of Robespierre's political creed that explain his importance:

- government should be based on ethical principles
- the people are always good
- in every community there must be a single sovereign will.

J.M. Thompson had expanded on this by arguing that no-one else at the time of the Revolution went as far as Robespierre in outlining the essential principles of the democratic state. These, which single him out as an important figure, include votes for all, equality of rights regardless of race or religion, payment for public service to enable rich and poor to hold office, and a national system of education.

Albert Soboul

A leading French historian, Albert Soboul interpreted the Revolution from a Marxist viewpoint. He supported the notion that Robespierre played an important role in attempting to provide a theoretical justification of the Terror but pointed out

that he was incapable of making an accurate analysis of the social realities of his time. According to Soboul, Robespierre was very much a prisoner of his own contradictions: he was too aware of the interests of the bourgeoisie to give his total support to the *sans-culottes*, and yet was too supportive of the needs of the *sans-culottes* to win the support of the bourgeoisie. In the end this contributed to his overthrow.

François Furet

The Revisionist historian François Furet sees Robespierre as a prophet, who believed everything he said and expressed it in the language of the Revolution. There are two ways, according to Furet, of totally understanding Robespierre as a historical figure: one is to detest him while the other is to make too much of him. He is an important figure, not because he reigned supreme over the Revolution for a few months, but because he was the mouthpiece of its most tragic period.

Some key books in the debate

Alfred Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (Jonathan Cape, 1968).

François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

François Furet, *The French Revolution 1770–1814* (Blackwell, 1988).

Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilian Robespierre* (Basil Blackwell, 1988).

John Hardman, *Robespierre* (Longman, 1999).

J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (Basil Blackwell, 1988).

Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787–1799* (Unwin, 1989).

Study Guide: AS Questions

In the style of AQA

- (a) Explain why the Committee of Public Safety was created in France in April 1793. (12 marks)
- (b) How important was the Terror in helping to preserve the Republic? (24 marks)

Exam tips

The cross-references are intended to take you straight to the material that will help you to answer the questions.

- (a) Try to provide some context by looking at the long-term reasons for the creation of the Committee of Public Safety (CPS). You could refer to the war against internal and external enemies, the influence of the *sans-culottes*, the power of the Jacobins and France's severe economic problems. You would need to stress that the CPS was one of a series of measures in 1793, although you should not waste time describing what else was done. The immediate reasons for its creation would include the need to supervise and speed up government by the Convention and